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ABSTRACT

A redesigned college composition/humanities program that has as its primary goal the raising of the self-esteem of a predominately black student body is described in this paper. First discussed are the deficiencies of an earlier program, traditional freshman composition followed by sophomore humanities, that centered around the cultural achievements of white Europeans. The new program is presented as implementing a thematic textbook designed specifically for the course, remedial skill-building exercises using programed material, patterned essay writing based on personal experience, and the student-centered or dramaturgical methods of Kenneth Macrorie and James Moffett, all within the context of the study of African, Oriental, and Western humanities. (AEA)

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The Philosophy of Teaching Composition Through a Cross-Cultural Approach to Interdisciplinary Humanities

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An Indiana minister of my acquaintance once found himself perplexed by the presence in his congregation of a young boy who casually walked down the center aisle of his church and came to a halt directly beneath the pulpit. As my ecclesiastical friend paused in momentary confusion, the youngster looked him straight in the eye and calmly announced in a loud voice, "Mister, you talk too much."

One thing I hope not to hear from you when I have finished today is "Mister, you talk too much," since my remarks are brief and what I do have to say seems to me especially relevant at a convention concerned with the person and the process in writing.

For writing, as we all know, is a process which involves whole persons. At Alabama State University we face the serious social and moral obligation of raising self-esteem among our nearly all-black student population. Through a familiar historical process, our students have lost contact with their past, and as a result, often feel that they are without a future.

Several internal matters complicate our already difficult situation. For one thing, our classes are overloaded and our writing lab and student counseling facilities understaffed. Second, proliferating academic and political bureaucracies threaten to sap the enthusiasm of even our most dedicated teachers. Finally, our University practices open admissions, and therefore our students represent all strata of black American society and all levels of academic achievement. Many are poverty-stricken adolescents with third grade reading levels from rural Lowndes County, Alabama. Others are the affluent sons and daughters of black professionals

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from Manhattan and elsewhere, and come to us well-prepared for college work. Some of our students think that Africa is a country in South America, while a few are well-versed in world geography, history, and literature. The large majority of them, however, are severely handicapped by a lack of basic writing skills. Yet in all of our students--from the most academically weak and submissive to the most academically skilled and militant--we find certain common characteristics. These characteristics include varying degrees of defeatism and frustration, little knowledge of black cultural history, and a high level of curiosity concerning their ethnic roots and achievements.

Until the present academic year we were teaching a two-quarter, Sophomore-level Humanities sequence which primarily treated the cultural achievements of white Europeans in typical historical-developmental fashion. These courses followed a traditional two-quarter Freshman Composition sequence, and because of our students' basic writing deficiencies, we structured the Humanities courses as a Sophomore continuation of Freshman Composition. Occasionally we would supplement our Humanities presentations with handouts and slide programs dealing with African or African-American Humanities. But these supplemental efforts necessarily affected our students as afterthoughts of the instructor rather than integral parts of our program. Painfully, we were brought face to face with the weaknesses of our approach each time students would ask--sometimes plaintively and often angrily--"But what were black people doing during the Renaissance?"

Because of our particular difficulties at Alabama State, the elusive trait of self-motivation among students could not possibly be more important. The first step toward producing self-motivation is destroying barriers against it, and obviously the content of our Humanities courses was a barrier for

our students. Moreover, the intimate linkage of culture and language made it a barrier with important implications for writing. As Mina Shaughnessy writes in Errors and Expectations:

> If students understand why they are being asked to learn something [in this case, standard written English] and if the reasons given do not conflict with deeper needs for self-respect and loyalty to their group (whether that be an economic, racial, or ethnic group), they are disposed to learn it. . . . Readiness [to learn] implies a respect for one's own linguistic aptitude and a confidence that the act of mastering a second variety of English is neither a disloyal nor destructive act but in fact a claim upon a wider culture . . . . (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 125-26.

This "claim upon a wider culture," I would add, should be as pervasive and all-embracing as we can make it; and if it is, it will reduce barriers to self-motivation, enhance self-esteem, and ultimately, facilitate the learning of writing. Thus, the claim upon a wider culture becomes a claim upon freedom.

So it was easy enough for us to see the nature of our problem and the direction which our Humanities program should take. We needed to actively seize upon our students' curiosity concerning their cultural heritage, and by making them aware of black achievements in the Humanities, bring them into closer contact with the larger human community. We hoped that this approach would reduce some of the obstacles to motivation and writing

competence typically imposed by the content of our Humanities courses. In short, we needed to generate authentic black pride, and we reasoned that such a development might even prove a positive stimulus to students' efforts in writing. In his book titled Joining the Human Race: How to Teach the Humanities, Fred Schroeder puts it better than I can. Professor Schroeder writes:

> The exalted image of Michelangelo's Adam and the Promethean appetite for achievement and knowledge of Faust are icons of man's potentialities that must be believed in by all men, regardless of inherited or environmental inequalities. The icon represents a mythical truth, not an empirical truth, but if the humanistic myth can abolish the . . . psychological block to learning, we are one bit closer to the realization of the myth.
>
> In this general sense, therefore, Humanities is a powerful educational means for destroying ghetto consciousness. In America, however, the ghetto consciousness is often Black consciousness, and a lily-white Italian Adam of centuries past is remote, foreign, and, if anything, a confirmation of inequality. But there are Black images of equal majesty . . . . (Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1973), p. 8.

Part of our task, then, was to seek out and systematically present our students with black images of human majesty. But we did not feel that our goal was best achieved by dwelling solely upon African or African-

American achievements. Such an approach would short-change our students on GRE's and other standardized tests while it would further ingrain in them the already deeply embedded notion that they are not human beings but "minorities." So we decided to build a program which would treat African, Oriental, and Western Humanities equally, while including a large number of African-American achievements as proper products of Western culture. We felt that by showing how a famous Ashanti dilemma tale reflects the paradox of human existence as defined by Jean-Paul Sartre in Being and Nothingness, students could discover the greatness of traditional African literature while they simultaneously studied one of the most important Western philosophies of our century. Similarly, we thought, students could gain much by studying the influence of Oriental poetry upon modern French and English verse, the importance of traditional African art for twentieth-century European art, and the ways in which modern African composers have adapted traditional Yoruba melodies to such complicated Western forms as the fugue and passacaglia. Eventually, we received a grant from our University research foundation enabling us to write our own thematic textbook, incorporating the above ideas and others, which we now use in all of our Humanities 101 and 102 classes.

But teaching basic writing is a far more complicated matter than merely removing barriers to motivation or even stimulating a strong desire to perform, and a new textbook in itself does not solve very many problems. Yet even Humanities teachers must begin at the beginning, and for us, the beginning was proper course content. The end, we hope, is freedom, a concept greatly treasured though little understood by our students.

Our textbook and our Humanities classes stress the fact that there are two sorts of human freedom. The first sort, which Sartre says we are

condemned to suffer, we call "meaningless." The second sort, which we call "meaningful," is that kind of freedom which Paul Tillich must have had in mind when he wrote that "Being alive is like being locked into a room full of open doors."

Those of you who have read John T. Gage's lead article in the February issue of College English, or Robert Eastman's text titled Style: Writing as the Discovery of Outlook (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), are perhaps aware of another quotation from Tillich currently making the rounds in composition circles, namely, that "Every style points to a self-interpretation of man, thus answering the question of the ultimate meaning of life." As Gage points out, Tillich's statement, "modestly conceived," is correct, and thus we have some cause to hold that a meaningless style points to a meaningless self-interpretation, while increasing self-awareness, self-esteem, and freedom will result in more meaningful writing.

This important connection between writing and freedom is one which we earnestly attempt to convey to our students in all of our assignments, and so we speak of writing as a path to freedom as important for them today as the underground railroad was important for their ancestors more than a century ago. And we explain that, like the underground railroad, the writing path has various way-stations, or goals, which mark one's progress toward competence and freedom.

In theory, at least, we hold that the first of these goals, including such matters as correct capitalization, spelling, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and pronoun usage, are best achieved through skill-building exercises and essay writing based on personal experience, and to some extent, through the admittedly unhumanistic means derived from behavioral psychology.

Thus, our Freshman Composition courses emphasize narration and sometimes use programmed texts. Whether or not these occasionally "uptaught" methods have been successful, however, we extend and expand the personal context to the global and adopt a more "hang-loose" pedagogy in Sophomore Humanities. That is, while we continue to place some emphasis upon remedial programmatic work, and devote some class time to instruction in the so-called "formal rules" of composition and writing the patterned essay, we spend more and more effort on student-centered or dramaturgical methods such as those described by Ken Macrorie and James Moffett. Thus, our writing assignments encourage students to discover their own voices, the voices of others in their class, and the voices of literary and historical heroes both past and present from Africa, the Orient, and the West. When these difficult techniques are successful, the students' cognitive worlds are enlarged, language usage is facilitated, self-awareness and self-esteem are generated, and writing does indeed become a path to freedom.

If you detect some inconsistency between the methods we choose for our Freshman Composition classes on the one hand and our Sophomore Humanities classes on the other, at least I know you are still awake and can hope that perhaps I have not talked too much after all. This inconsistency, which appears to embrace both rule learning on the one hand and, on the other, "playing with the whole universe of discourse," to use Moffett's phrase, is one which we attempt to subdue. Yet it is one which may well exist so long as English teachers continue to think, as we apparently do, of writing as an activity simultaneously involving both a person and a process.